



# Cultural Base

Social Platform  
on Cultural Heritage  
and European Identities

## Is the invention of memories necessary to identities?

### AXIS 1. CULTURAL MEMORY TF2. Memory and identities

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### ***"Identity" in Europe today***

The configurations of identity through memory and heritage left the greatest mark on the last two decades. "Memory", "identity" and "heritage" have benefited from nearly unprecedented success, echoed by the growing field of study that has consecrated their usage, and which appears to be taking over the interest that was formerly dedicated to "history". Probably, as Aleida Assmann stated, "it is only since then that the connection between time, identity, and memory in their three dimensions of the personal, the social, and the cultural has become more and more evident" (Assmann, 2012 ). Of course, each concept has been part of a long history we cannot discuss at full length here.

The notion of "identity" has a semantic field that evokes "the sameness of a person or thing at all times or in all circumstances; the condition or fact that a person or thing is itself and not something else; individually, personally". The word addresses also "the continuity of the personality (...), the quality or condition of being the same in substance, composition, nature, properties, or in particular qualities under consideration; absolute or essential sameness; oneness" (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989: 620-1).

One can think that national identity "a) singles out a nation from the rest of humanity as being somehow different or typical, and b) articulates or suggests a moral, collective-psychological motivation for given social or national features." (Beller, 2007, XIV). In these discourses, the reference to temporality is always present: identity is a testimony of continuity. Identity is supposed to be related to an immutable reality – even if, in fact, individuals possess different identities, and multifarious memories.

Heidrun Friese comments saying that comparing the social sciences, since the 1940's, and the political issues, the result is a paradox: "within social theory and philosophy one can observe tendencies to question and ultimately dissolve the concept "identity", whereas social practices emerge



## Is the invention of memories necessary to identities?

and increase in significance that persistently create and strengthen “identities” (Friese, 2).

### ***The development of the “memory studies” in the European scholarship***

From the Enlightenment onwards, the ability to remember came to be seen as a secondary faculty. After the end of the “art of memory” around 1800, several factors of transformation changed the intergenerational memory to a purely mediated form of memory that no longer bears any direct relation to the past. (Assmann, 2011).

The establishment of memory as a field of enquiry in the social sciences is largely due to the work of the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945) and more particularly to his work on *The Social Framework of Memory* (1925). Maurice Halbwachs pointed out that “one can speak of the existence of a collective memory and the social frameworks of memory, and it is because our individual thoughts are framed by and participate in this memory that we are capable of remembering” (Halbwachs, 1994: VI).

The category of “collective memory” has been elaborated as a specific one, and has become an object of research of its own, related to cultural identity for anthropologists, (Connerton, 1989), and to cultural landscapes for geographers (Lowenthal, 1996). In the historical field, the collective work initiated by Pierre Nora about “realms of memory”, or “memory sites” has been mostly influential. For him, “lieux de mémoire” appear “when memory crystallizes and secretes itself at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that the memory has been torn”.

All the national histories of memories, linked to the French enterprise, as Astrid Erll made it in an introduction to one of the last handbooks on cultural memory studies, are more or less “restricted to the study of those ways of making sense of the past which are intentional and performed



## Is the invention of memories necessary to identities?

through narrative, and which go hand in hand with the construction of identities" – in sum they paint "the same nexus: intentional remembering, narrative, identity" (Erll, 2010).

Taken in this classic sense, the heritage process tends to preserve the past through its material traces: its intention is to valorise rather than criticize. For example, for the last thirty years, David Lowenthal has assimilated heritage conscience with a representation of the past appropriated by a community to exclusively instrumental ends, dedicated to promoting a local or identity driven past that is hardly occupied with authenticity and even less with truth but rather devoted to glorifying a voluntarily mythicized memory. Heritage incarnates a false conscience of the past, and its relationship to the duty of memory has become suspicious.

### ***The new agenda of "cultural memory" and cultural heritage***

But, as Jay Winter sums up, "the ways that sites of memory and the public commemorations surrounding them have the potential for dominated groups to contest their subordinate status in public" (Winter). The agenda of research about cultural memory is becoming more fluid: for the historian and sociologist Jeffrey Olick, as for many other historians, "collective memory", being a highly complex process, involving numerous different people, practices, materials, and themes, is no more "either the authentic residue of the past or an entirely malleable construction in the present" but "a fluid negotiation".

In the field of memory studies, the notion of "cultural" memory appears now central, coinciding logically with the turn of "cultural history". Aleida and Jan Assmann have set recently a whole range of categories of memories, according to the passing of time, and the dialectics of public and private memories. They introduced the term "communicative memory" "in order to delineate the difference between Halbwachs' concept of "collective memory" and their understanding of "cultural memory". The cultural



## Is the invention of memories necessary to identities?

memory, supported by some classic frames (monuments, museums and archives) but also by the artifices of contemporary media related to an age of technical reproducibility, plays a role of unprecedented importance in the public sphere, fuelled by claims that lead to new memorial obligations.

Aleida Assmann makes use of a division imagined by the cultural historian Jakob Burckhardt in the material past between two categories: "messages" to posterity and simple "traces". In the active memory, "works of art are destined to be repeatedly reread, appreciated, staged, performed, and commented " and " only a small percentage acquire this status through a complex procedure which we call canonization ". So we have at one end of the spectrum the museum, and at the other end "the storehouse for cultural relicts " for a "specialized historical curiosity". But there is no strict separation between the two functions of cultural memory, between passive cultural memory and memorial places or spaces.

### ***The legacy of heritage's identities and of memory's wars***

Throughout European history, material elements of the past, presented as repertoires of monuments, or collections, have been identified with the prestige of a territory or a specific political regime. The glory of the prince, the quality of a population, the spirit of a place have always been partially defined by historical considerations and aesthetic judgements of value related to such material. This might be the classical definition of a museum built to celebrate the glory of a city, the best example of which are probably the humanist collections of the Capitoline museum in Rome. In the course of the eighteenth century, the development of antiquarian science reinforced the relationship between patriotism and artistic or archaeological research.

But the legacy of Romantic historiography to national memory is obvious in its link to the memory of the dead, especially in the works of the great French historian Michelet. "Michelet made it clear that those whom he was



## Is the invention of memories necessary to identities?

exhuming were by no means a random assemblage of forgotten, anonymous dead. They were those whose sacrifices, throughout History, made possible the rupture of 1789 and the self-conscious appearance of the French nation, even when these sacrifices were not understood as such by the victims. (...) This formulation is probably unprecedented. Michelet not only claimed to speak on behalf of large numbers of anonymous dead people, but insisted with poignant authority that he could say what they really meant and really wanted, since they themselves did not understand. (...) In this vein, more and more "second-generation" nationalists learned to speak "for dead people."(Anderson, 1991, 198).

In terms of "uses of the past", as related to properly "national" collections, a decisive turn was the qualification of national art through an "ethnographic" approach that focuses on popular and local art, especially in Northern and Central Europe, constituting an emblematic kind of use of the past. On the contrary, in 1882 Ernest Renan (1823-1892) published *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation ?*, which became quickly a universal classic of the thesis of the nation as a voluntary contract of everyday (Smith, 2013).

This new narrative of "identity" was born from the changes of consciousness related to the ruptures in specific historical circumstances. That is why Renan expressed in the same time a need for forgetting, as Benedict Anderson explained: "Renan's readers were being told to "have already forgotten" what Renan's own words assumed that they naturally remembered". And he explained a bit further "Having to "have already forgotten" tragedies of which one needs unceasingly to be "reminded" turns out to be a characteristic device in the later construction of national genealogies" (Anderson, 1991, 201).

The museum is par excellence the place where precious "things" are becoming fruitful through their display. A crucial idea stated that museums were founded to achieve political and social objectives: to influence the moral and intellectual conduct of the citizen and to provide declarations of



## Is the invention of memories necessary to identities?

national identity as assertions of certain views of history or culture. Museums were monuments to their age, producing “master narratives” of liberal reform and urban government, and museum-going was a civic ritual that naturalized the democratic nation-state.

In the mid-twentieth century, the propositions of Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History* written in 1940, shortly before his suicide in Port-Bou brought in a new mutation. Henceforth, it becomes necessary to write history “against the grain”, that is to say from the point of view of the defeated, against the historicist tradition. His formula may be applied more widely to a large part of the twentieth century situation in terms of the relationship between heritage and history writing. “According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.” (Benjamin, 1968). A lot of subsequent criticism of heritage processes build on this formulation, as do indeed the possibilities of a counter-heritage, of an heritage of darkness, that we see and partake of today, either in situ or in the museum.

### ***Can Cultural heritage be mobile? Can cultural memory be mobile?***

The question of the mobility of the heritages in European context stands in a difficult relation with national or local identities. The history of the movement of works between different owners and through different types of collections provides a starting point. The entry of objects into museums raised more or less explicitly the question of a rupture or of a specific phase in the long life of images and objects: for a long time, the memory and the identity of the museum were understood according to the glorifying logics of collection or on the contrary as a narrative of reparation in relation to objects unduly seized and assembled.



## Is the invention of memories necessary to identities?

The contradictions between the meaning of an object in its environment and its place in the development of institutions such as the museum came into focus at the same time as the development of nationalism in the first half of the nineteenth century – even if its premises were visible earlier. Discussions related to property and legitimacy were central in the formation of a new collective culture, considered as a heritage of useful models for national schools of arts, as much as for the progress of knowledge.

The analysis of such debates needs to take into account the history of those philanthropists and patrons who, in a number of cases, hoped to gain in respectability by contributing to the growth of public collections. It also needs to include the history of those social reformers who pleaded in favour of the positive values of the museum as a place that allowed visitor to be inspired by most elevated ideals. These debates relate the museum to questions of political theory, to the notions of individualism and liberalism, philanthropy and the role of public institutions.

The “lending for Europe” is a project that aims to facilitate museum object mobility ([www.lending-for-europe.eu](http://www.lending-for-europe.eu)). According to it, "one of the key questions is should we stop hoarding and start concentrating on the better use of the already existing collections? Should museums have easier access to those parts of each others' collections that are being underused? Should museums start thinking differently? Digital platforms can easily help museums to create ways to look for and find objects that the collection is desperately lacking. It is simply a matter of wanting to open those doors".

The status of this mobile property, considered on one hand from the point of view of a selection of major national museums and on the other hand, from a selection of specialized exhibitions dealing with specific territorially, defined heritage and testifies for some privileged networks of circulation and cultural transfers in Europe, highlighting the specific role of “ambassador objects”. The idea of a “portability” of things is an interesting



## Is the invention of memories necessary to identities?

one, which could be used as a means to develop a new sense of heritage, identity and memory in the modern culture. But it means that today, we could resolve the issues of the recognition and acceptability of different memories and identities in Europe.

European discourses of ownership developed in national museums over the last century in relation to the possession of artefacts that are subject to restitution claims, in Europe (Diner and Wunberg, 2007) or outside, are now publicly debated. Judiciary cases of contested objects in Europe can be related to contexts of colonial appropriations of material culture and post-colonial claims, to processes of secularisation of church property, to situations of war and plunder, to archaeological finds in territories where national frontiers have changed or are disputed.

### ***Identity and memory: the French laws***

In the social construction of identities, traditions and cultural ideas based on representations of the past, heritages have always been caught in the tension between the display of a collective self-presentation, and the embarrassment of a self-knowledge of collective failures, however today they may represent shame as well as images of glory, as a political means of enhancing the present greatness of the country (Poulot, 2008). The glory or the shame of a community as displayed in museums can be used to emphasize the authority of tradition, provoke various emotions in people, and expose these emotions to a contest of values.

The most recent generation of museums of identities and migrations, such as that of the City (museum) of the History of Immigration in Paris, differentiates itself by calling on family and personal memories to incarnate the utopia of a democratically shared past, where all participate in historical research and writing. Indeed, the most recent generation of Heritage disposals can be characterised by its call on family and personal memories, that seek to incarnate the utopia of democratically shared research and



## Is the invention of memories necessary to identities?

historical writing, or at least to establish a general call to all to contribute in bearing witness to history.

In some extreme cases remains have been turned into relics and the weight of material culture is manifest in the visitor practices that in certain contexts recall religious pilgrimage. As Aleida Assmann wrote, one must give attention “to a problem that confronts all visitors to a place that is at one and the same time a museum, a crime scene, and a memorial” (Assmann, 2011: 365).

The words "duty of memory" and "national identity" entered directly into the political field from the mid-1970's and above all from the beginning of the XXIth century. First, the expression “duty of memory” was used in the pedagogy of antifascism, but in the late 1970s it became an autonomous element. Then the French Parliament has adopted four statutes dealing with: the history and memory of the Holocaust, the Negro Trade and Slavery, Colonization and the Armenian Genocide. A controversy erupted over these so-called "memorial laws", and the relationship between law and history as it has developed in the literature of both disciplines, since 2005.

The discussion is about the fact that the State can legitimately use legislation as a means to outline the collective memory of its citizens, with the potential risks it creates, and with the self-reflexivity in historical and legal scholarships. These debates prove how memories are always linked to values, and how discussion about duties or excess of memory is a phenomenon of pluralism and democratic discussion (Lavabre; Gensburger & Lavabre).

In fact, in all countries that have known more or less violent debates about the writing and teaching of national history one of the main issues was to consider if the history could be changed according to the new demands by newcomers, or if it must be adapted in a better way to instruct the citizens, and to build the community (Weil, 2015).



***Dealing anew with the Intangible Heritage: the recognition and acceptability of "incorrect" traditions in a new identity***

Everyone can agree with Carlos Closa that "within the EU model of community of citizens and states, recognition of just claims on memory emerges as a moral duty". But we need simultaneously a caveat: "claims are not just in themselves but need to be contrasted against minimal and shared moral understandings ". The obvious difficulty is that "claims for recognition of memory in the EU open up parts of national narratives on memories", and that, simultaneously, "any demand for recognition needs to satisfy a test of its legitimate acceptability". So most of social scientists suggest not to create a single "European memory" but to define procedures to help specific national communities to revise their "darker legacies".

James Clifford, about a precise situation involving memory and identity in a part of Europe, revealed the difficult moves between the necessity for memory and the future of identity. He commented an article by Mieke Bal about the Dutch tradition of Zwarte Piets, linked to a racist and colonialist legacy : "Is this a tradition that can be reformed ?" Contrary to Bal's position, he wrote that "moralistic suppressions, hostile disarticulations, will always be necessary parts of a process which produces less 'reasonable' cultural solutions than the one Bal projects. (...) For her connection to Zwarte Piets is (...) also a commitment to grappling with negativity, to the principle of collectivities confronting and understanding the dark legacies of their pasts. This too is part of tradition, seen as critical 'historical practice' - whether the reckoning takes the form of truth and reconciliation commissions, repatriating bones and artifacts, or arguments over female circumcision." (Clifford, 2004).



### **Concluding Remarks**

Lucien Febvre, the great French historian, was indignant in 1953 when he learned that Carlo V was supposedly greeted to be one of the makers of Europe : “Many thanks ! Why not Napoleon or Hitler ?” (Febvre, 1993). This invocation of a professional stance against the political and institutional uses of the past is our legacy, as well as the anthropological point of view against the idea of a national identity conceived as a “mystery” or a “miracle” – and that could be understood, on the contrary, as a “mythideology” (Detienne, 2014). But the plea for particularities, identities, and for their respect, is another component of the cultural turn of the last decades, and the triumph of Heritage is part of it, in most of the representations of memory and of its duties. The different proposals to deal with these issues have yet to imagine (new) identities with (old) memories, when every claim about an identity seems always about mobilizing a memory.

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